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LEGENDS OF KING ARTHUR. LITERATURE CURRICULUM III, TEACHER VERSION.

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A TEACHER VERSION OF A CURRICULUM GUIDE ON THE "LEGENDS OF KING ARTHUR" WAS DEVELOPED. AN ENLARGED AND MORE DETAILED INTRODUCTION THAN THAT PROVIDED FOR THE STUDENT VERSION WAS PRESENTED. STUDY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS, WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, AND SUGGESTED READINGS WERE ALSO PROVIDED. THE STUDENT VERSION IS ED 010 813. RELATED REPORTS ARE ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160 AND ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832. (GD)

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Literature Curriculum III,
Teacher Version,

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Literature Curriculum III

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INTRODUCTION

Most students will be familiar with Walt Disney's version of The Sword in the Stone. They may also know some of the lyrics from the Lerner and Loewe Broadway production of Camelot, a musical show based upon The Once and Future King by T. H. White, who retells the stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table in the language of today.

As the spiral curriculum brings us around again to the study of myths--this time, the so-called second age of fable--it may be helpful to review briefly our reasons for including tales so remote from the world we live in. These fantastic stories of enchanted castles, magicians, magical appearances and disappearances are the stuff of romance, seeming to have no other purpose but to entertain with pleasant stories. Yet in these stories we have the raw materials of literature, the creative expression of the mind of a people much closer to us than the ancient Greeks, the Norsemen, or the Indians, whose myths we studied in the seventh grade. But like these earlier treatments of the eternal questions, the Arthurian tales deserve attention for their storied treatment of man's aspirations, fears, his awe in the face of the mysterious and the unknown. The continual return of writers, from the Middle Ages to the present day, to this body of legends testifies to their value.

Again, the reading of myths is a reminder of how the symbolic functions in literature. Instead of a single, rigid interpretation, the range of possible meanings should be indicated, with a view to illustrating that it is the nature of symbols to stand for the unknown or the imperfectly understood. For example, the Holy Grail was the object of a great Arthurian quest. At the same time, some scholars have identified this Christian symbol with such related primitive or oriental forms as the cauldron of plenty or the begging bowl of the Buddha. But instead of tracing possible parallels, it is simpler and more meaningful at this stage to consider the Holy Grail in its most universal aspect as, like the Round Table, a symbol of the spiritual wholeness that man has always been seeking.

Still another value of studying the stories of King Arthur is to observe that history has become legend. It is possible from some of the early chronicles dating back to the ninth century to form a very general picture of Arthur as a historical figure living toward the end of the fifth century. He must have been one of the last Romanized Britons to command his fellow countrymen in a number of battles fought against the invading Saxons. Memories of the unity of the Britons under Arthur and a period of prosperity no doubt contributed to the growing cult of the king who would some day return to rescue his people from evil times. One historian of these times, Geoffrey of Monmouth, who lived from about 1100-1154, was determined to give the British an emperor equivalent to Charlemagne. In the person of Arthur he found the makings of a culture hero around whom stories could cluster, as they have tended to cluster around such American heroes as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

Glorifying of the past is, of course, common to all peoples, but in the stories of King Arthur we find the Celtic imagination performing some of its most inspired work as it combines with Christian doctrine and symbolism to create a mythology specifically attuned to the barbarian peoples of Europe. For the mythology of Greece and Rome was in many ways an alien product and certainly ill-suited to the Age of Faith. But some centuries were necessary for the shaping of the Arthurian tales to satisfy the deep yearnings of the Middle Ages. First, the folk lore elements were introduced by the Welsh and Breton bards who sang of the exploits of Arthur and his knights. Later, in the hands of certain French poets, psychological refinements of characterization provided an additional source of interest. Finally, for English readers at least, a definitive account of King Arthur and his knights, based primarily on French prose versions of the romances, was written by Sir Thomas Malory toward the close of the fifteenth century and printed by Caxton in 1485. Before Malory, the method of telling followed the oral tradition of long romances. One knight would set out on an adventure, but his path would be crossed and recrossed by others, so that the original story became lost in a maze of other incidents and it was difficult to detect the path of the original narrative. It was Malory who took the tangled skein of Arthurian tales and produced a reasonably coherent cycle which was to become a storehouse of romance for later writers.

All the tellers of the legend--Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Spenser, Tennyson, William Morris, Charles Willians, E. A. Robinson, to name a representative few, follow the familiar pattern of the interpreting the legend in the light of their own age. Tennyson, for example, tends to turn the story of Arthur into an allegory of the spiritual principle in conflict with the senses. But although the union of sense and ideal can never be perfect, something still remains:

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

These words of Arthur at the moment of departure suggest that the ideal must always live and reign, even if in its various forms it passes away. But this Victorian point of view has given way in more recent writers, such as E. A. Robinson, to an exploration of the psychological problems of the characters. Evidently these stories of a past age still hold interest for their portrayal of some of the mysteries of human life.

Some Notes on Medieval Romance

As already noted, the Romances grew out of the feudal system. Professional minstrels entertained the feudal lords with narrative poems which mirrored the war-like interests of the audience. Especially in France, the "chanson de geste" became popular, with the two major themes of Christian knights fighting heathen enemies, and disgruntled barons fighting each other, or their king. These stories were often long enough to be told in successive installments. Many of them incorporated elements of magic and the supernatural.

Another type of popular romance emerged in France, the "Amour Courtois" which idealized love of a lady as the inspiration of the knightly virtues--bravery, loyalty, generosity, and refined manners. The cycle of Arthurian romances lent themselves splendidly to this theme of courtly love, first developed by Chrétien de Troyes. Written somewhere between 1160 and 1190 around such heroes as Gawaine, Launcelot, Percivale, and Tristram, the stories are full of magic spells and fairy lore as well as courtly love. In the early romances, even the quest for the Holy Grail is rather worldly. By the thirteenth century, the religious elements were stressed, and a new, ascetic hero, Galahad, was introduced in the "QUESTE DEL GRAAL". In this work, the sieges and combats are allegorized into spiritual conflicts of the soul against the forces of evil. This is the version that Malory included in his Morte D'Arthur.

In the late twelfth century in France there appeared a short romantic narrative in verse called the "lai," which was later copied in England, as elsewhere. Often these verses dealt with the supernatural, and were sometimes called lays by their authors, "The Lay of the Ash Tree," for example. Other stories also developed at the same time, using similar stereotyped situations, usually to point a moral. Virtue in distress, though suffering many trials, is always vindicated, often through a miracle, as in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale."

With the invention of printing, romances gradually found a much wider audience than the aristocracy that originally nourished them, and in Europe they enjoyed a long period of popularity.

Major Characteristics of the Romances

To summarize, the major characteristics of the romances in their various forms are as follows:

a) An aura of unreality, despite realistic details in descriptions of such things as tournaments, feasts, and hunts.

b) Exaggerated characters, so that evil knights are all vice, and good knights all virtue to a degree that stretches credulity. (This is less true of the tales in Malory's Morte D'Arthur.)

c) Adventures that are often remote from life. Heroes with superhuman endurance fight giants or dragons or other knights, up to their ankles in blood, to break a spell and release a fair maiden or simply to prove who is the better jouster.

d) Although the romances are set in times long ago, the ideals they represent are those of the author's own period. So Launcelot, a sixth century knight, conforms to the rules of chivalry of the twelfth century. The real Arthur and his warriors probably lived in wooden halls and had only shirts of mail and shields with which to defend themselves against an enemy's blows. The Knights of the Round Table in the romances as they came to be written down took on the manners and customs of the fifteenth century. They were sheathed from head to toe in plate armor, and lived in moated castles.

e) The presence of a quest marks a large number of the romances. Sometimes it is imposed by a lady to prove the worthiness of her knight, sometimes the king proves the loyalty of his knights through a quest, sometimes it is self-imposed to win fame, and sometimes religious fervor supplies the motive, as in the Grail stories. In any event, the knight is sure to have to cope with hostile supernatural forces.

f) The structure of most romances is loose and episodic, with many digressions. (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a notable exception.)

g) The theme of courtly love permeates the romances. The lady is venerated; her every wish instantly obeyed by her knight who turns pale in her presence, sighs in her absence, and suffers torments for love of her.

A Note on This Version of the Tales

Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur weaves into one great narrative the best of the Arthurian romances. Malory's language, however, is difficult for young readers unless it is adapted somewhat. We have therefore prepared a special version of selections from Malory expressly for this curriculum, making our own adaptation which we hope has advantages and avoids difficulties of the available versions such as those by Howard Pyle or Mary MacLeod. Pyle's The Story of King Arthur and His Knights, for example, is based only in a general way on Malory, for Pyle adds large amounts of material--descriptions episodes, etc. --that are not in Malory at all. And the false archaism of the style that he has adopted is an offense to anyone who is familiar with the original. The MacLeod version is distinctly better from a literary point of view, but in the effort to render the style of Malory readily intelligible to modern readers Miss MacLeod loses much of the charm and beauty of Malory's style.

The version we have prepared adheres very closely to the Morte D'Arthur itself, both in wording and in content. Nothing has been added save an occasional phrase or two to make a transition between telescoped incidents. The spelling and punctuation have been modernized, and modern equivalents have been supplied for the more obscure archaisms of vocabulary. But as far as we thought intelligibility would permit, we have tried to retain the flavor and indeed the very wording of Malory's own style.

The Morte D'Arthur is of course a long book and a diffuse one. We have selected only certain episodes and tales, trying to choose those that would furnish a fairly complete understanding of the Arthurian cycle --the main events of Arthur's life and reign--and that would offer typical examples of knightly adventures. Some of Malory is of course pretty robust; and while we would argue stoutly that in no place is the Morte D'Arthur prurient (as for example the James Bond films and books distinctly are), we have on occasion deleted passages or episodes to which

legitimate objection might be made as literary fare for fourteen year-olds. The major change that we have made is the compression of certain tales and incidents, for Malory tends both to diffuseness and digression. Nearly always, however, when such compression has been necessary, we have managed it by deletion rather than rewriting, staying with Malory's own sentences. The result of all this labor is, we hope, a fair representation of a great classic, both in style and substance, yet realistically adapted to the reading ability of the children for whom it is intended.

The selections in this version fall into four parts: 1) the coming of Arthur, his coronation, the gaining of Excalibur, the winning of Guenever, and the establishment of the Round Table; 2) the story of Gareth and Linet, well-unified knightly quest of the secular variety; 3) the quest of the Holy Grail, centered mainly on Galahad; 4) and the breach between Arthur and Launcelot over Guenever, the ensuing war in France, Mordred's treachery, the last great war between the hosts of Arthur and of Mordred, and the passing of the king. Each of the sections is relatively self-contained, so that some students whose reading ability is more limited may be asked to read only one or two of the four sections. Perhaps only the best students will have time to read the entire unit; but if students find the material interesting, they may surprise you and read more than they might normally be expected to.

At the very end of the unit we have added something special for those students who have above-average linguistic aptitude: three short chapters dealing with Sir Tristram and reproduced in the original spelling; we have followed this with the same three chapters in modern spelling, though otherwise unchanged. Bright students should enjoy deciphering the 1485 version, the more so since the episode told of includes love and blood if not thunder.

Discussing the Questions

Often there is no one "right" answer, and students should be encouraged to express their ideas as they think about the stories. Although the terms "Subject, Form, and Point of View" are often not used in the Student Version, all the questions have been designed with these three analytical guiding principles in mind to help the students delve deeply into the work itself. The answers to many of the questions are self evident, but for your convenience, and to provide a very general guide of the lines along which the discussion might very well proceed, some additional notes will be added in the Teacher Version. The numbers refer to the number of the applicable question in the Student Version.

Study Questions for Part One

1. Why is it so important that Arthur should be able to perform the magic of pulling the sword from the stone? -- The feat symbolizes the divine and mysterious right of Arthur to rule the land. It was his destiny to be King, and the pulling of the sword from the stone is evidence that his rule has more than mortal sanction.

2. Why did the nobles delay so long in recognizing and crowning Arthur? -- Because of Arthur's apparent lack of noble lineage, but also of course because a king meant the lessening of the power of the nobles. The students should see that under all the magic is a great deal of psychological and political accuracy.

3. The Arthurian legends are filled with magic and with heroic deeds, but they are also firmly rooted in reality. It is this combination that has made them so popular for so many hundreds of years. How does this combination work in the story of the establishment of Arthur's kingdom? -- The students could have a lot of fun with this one. This is a practical story of Realpolitik. Arthur establishes his key administrators, and then sets about destroying the opposition. Arthur fights with a magic sword that is as bright as thirty torches, but the fight he is engaged in is against rebellious nobles who resent a central authority. He then turns outside his realm, and makes a series of alliances, thus getting his foreign policy in shape. With the aid of his allies he defeats his enemies. All this is just exactly the sort of thing that a new king establishing his realm would do.

4. There is more than one sort of reality. What aspect of reality is dealt with in Section V? -- You may want to tread a little delicately here. The incestuous relationship of Arthur and his half-sister resulted in the birth of Mordred, who was to be the main instrument in the destruction of the Round Table and the realm. Incest was considered a particularly foul sin, and was associated with an ineradicable curse; and it made no difference if the relationship were unknown to the principals. (Cf. the Oedipus story.) Thus Merlin tells Arthur that his act will result in the destruction of his kingdom. The degree to which the incest motif is pursued will depend on the maturity of the class and the school district; but the main purpose of the question is to get the students to see that even this early in the story we are made aware of the ultimate doom of Arthur's reign and of the Fellowship of the Round Table. One of the themes of the Arthurian legends is the establishment of the ideal society (this theme is one, incidentally, that is emphasized by White in The Once and Future King). But it is impossible in the human world to establish permanently the ideal, and hence early in the story we are shown the seeds of discord and ultimate destruction being sown. This is no fairy tale in which everyone lives happily ever after. Legends and myths are the imaginative representation of reality, and a realistic representation of reality must take account of the mutability of human institutions. Of course Arthur will err; of course there must be a Mordred; of course the Fellowship will be destroyed. The archetypal incest motif is the symbolic representation of this aspect of reality.

5. What magical qualities were attached to the sword Excalibur and its scabbard? Why did Arthur as king need this protection? -- To maintain his kingdom, Arthur needs the help of powers beyond himself: the supernatural again comes to his aid with the magical sword and scabbard.

6. If there is a deeper meaning conveyed through the story of Excalibur, how would you interpret it? What might the Lady of the Lake, and the forest itself, signify? -- Some possible interpretations are suggested here; they are by no means definitive. The Lady of the Lake is a spiritual power emanating from the depths of the human spirit, something that man himself cannot fully understand, but that in this instance comes to the aid of the struggling hero. Again, Arthur's dedication to the righteous cause is a secret source of strength. As for the forest, the scene of so many combats, it is the unknown place of dangers, the wilderness through which the hero must battle his way, instead of staying safely at home. The students may want to discuss the question of whether there can be a hero without dangers. Is security, therefore, the only ideal for life?

7. Part VII of this section begins with a curious incident in which Arthur tries to send all the children to sea. This sort of incident is very common in literature. The recurrence in literature of similar situations or of similar themes or of similar attitudes is called a motif. Can you think of anything you have read where this motif of an unsuccessful attempt to destroy a child appears? What do you think is the significance of this motif? -- The students will undoubtedly think of fairy stories or legends in which the child is left to die but is saved by the kindly woodsman, or where the hired murderer relents and gives the babe to a friendly shepherd. Some of them may recall the biblical story of the Hdy Innocents, where Herod was trying to get rid of Jesus. It is of course the idea that, do what he will, man cannot escape or evade his destiny. Mordred is destined to be the agent of Arthur's destruction, and Arthur is unable to alter his fate. Neither was Herod, and neither was Snow White's wicked stepmother.

8. What is the significance of the Round Table and of the "seat perilous"? -- The Round Table may be thought of as the expression of the Ideal. The circle traditionally represents perfection, linked as it is with notions of eternity. The idea of democracy is also expressed, since each place is of equal importance. In the "seat perilous" there is room left for the unfolding of hidden future events.

9. What seems to be the importance both of Arthur's wedding and of the founding of the Fellowship of the Round Table? -- Both Arthur's wedding and the founding of the Fellowship of the Round Table suggest a kind of earthly perfection, but if it were to last, life would stagnate; hence, strange adventures begin immediately to disturb the perfect order.

10. In the oath sworn by the Knights of the Round Table, do you see any contrast with the lawless world that they lived in? -- In a world where might was right, the knights who swore to be merciful were transforming the soldier's life into something nearer the Christian idea.

11. You have now read a number of stories about King Arthur. Is each an episode that stands alone, or are they connected by anything more than having the same central character? -- They are connected by the same point of view, one which accepts the duty of obeying the mysterious and unseen destiny that guides the fate of individuals. Merlin seems to be a spokesman for this destiny and therefore his words are heeded.

12. A writer often unconsciously puts into his work the prevailing point of view of his age. What details included in these stories point to the writer as living in feudal times? How can you explain this, knowing that the historic Arthur lived at the end of the fifth century? -- In the historical times in which Arthur lived, there would have been no knights, but these stories were developed during the Middle Ages, when historical perspective as we know it did not exist. Even much later, in Shakespeare's time, people simply assumed that past ages were like their own.

Study Questions for Part Two

1. Would this story be suitable for a movie? Give reasons for your answer.

2. This story follows the typical narrative pattern of beginning, middle, and end. What is included in the beginning? Where does it end? List the events that take place in the middle section. What pattern does the arrangement follow? -- Students will recognize the chronological pattern that the story follows.

3. This story follows a formula that is as old as story-telling itself, and that is as popular and successful today as it was in Malory's time. What is that formula, and why do you think it is so popular? -- The disguised hero overcomes tremendous obstacles, demonstrates his true heroism, and wins the hand of the lovely lady and they all live happily ever after. This story is merely the medieval projection of a fantasy that is common to all people in all times. The students should gain considerable insight into themselves and human nature when they realize that their fantasies are similar, with but the trappings changed. Space hero destroys the Venusian Mindworms and marries Astra, queen of Urania. Heroism, adventure, and reward.

4. Can you find any familiar motifs operating in this story?--Someone will undoubtedly mention the Hero Incognito, and probably the Humble Occupation of the Hero as well. Humble service is a form of initiation for the hero, a humiliation that helps prepare him for his future great deeds. The Hero Incognito is a stock device. Not only does it serve to make the story more suspenseful, and make the deeds of the hero more remarkable, but it also serves as a test of the true nobility of the other characters in the story. Gareth says this is why he is doing it, and we note that Kay fails the test while the other knights are courteous to Gareth.

5. Apart from pure entertainment, do you think there is any other purpose behind the story? How has this determined the form the story takes? -- Quite obviously, knightly virtues are being extolled. After passing through encounters with the black, green, red, and blue knights and fighting the most dangerous battle of all at Castle Perilous, Gareth has earned the right to the lady of the castle. Once more, we have a symbol of the soul's encounter with humiliations and dangers. If it succeeds in meeting these challenges, it will be rewarded, as Beaumains is rewarded in the end with his heart's desire.

6. Why does Gareth endure the bad treatment he got from Linet, especially when he doesn't end up marrying her? -- Autres temps, autres moeurs. This question is really an extension of the previous one. The code of chivalry and courtly love required that the lady be obeyed in all things, that true knight was never discourteous, and that he accept any ill usage she handed out. This story is of the ideal gentleman of that time.

7. How well did Gareth know the lady whom he rescued? Why did he want to marry her? Why do you suppose she would not even see him for a year?

Study Questions for Part III

A note to the teacher: It might be well to fill the students in on Launcelot and his position in the Arthurian material. He figures in both this and the following section. The most important features of the character of Sir Launcelot are his nobility as a knight and his love for Guenever. By Christian standards, this love is sinful and therefore Launcelot is barred from the ultimate bliss of succeeding in the quest for the Holy Grail. Nevertheless, this love accounts for the fascination that he has held for generations of readers. He is not simply another brave knight but one both in the grip of a fatal fascination and capable of attracting other women in the same fatal way. His name gives the clue: Sir Launcelot of the Lake. For he was brought up by the Lady of the Lake beneath the waves, and he shares in the witchery of that inhuman abode. He is both human and non-human in his total allegiance to Guenever. Ninth graders would of course have trouble grasping all the implications of the fatal love that Sir Launcelot stands for, a love that helps to destroy the whole fabric of Arthur's kingdom. But they should know that he is the knight par excellence of the Round Table, that he is deeply devoted to Arthur and Arthur to him, and that he and Guenever are hopelessly in love.

1. What is the significance of the Seat Perilous? Why did it remain empty? -- It is reserved for the knight with the perfectly pure soul, and hence perilous for anyone else to attempt. It keeps the Round Table from being completed, and hence permits the Fellowship to continue. For when the circle is completed, there is no possibility of further development, and the inevitable decline begins.

2. Why did Galahad want to receive his knighthood from the hand of Sir Launcelot? -- It is significant that Galahad is the son of Launcelot for he represents the redemption of the guilty love that made Launcelot fail in the Grail quest. The son of Launcelot is Launcelot himself reborn in a state of innocence.

3. Who do you think the old man might be who brought Sir Galahad to the Round Table? -- Some legends say that the old man who brought Galahad to the Round Table was really Merlin in disguise. Others assert it was Joseph of Arimathea who is supposed to have brought to Britain the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper. It should be noted that Galahad is led to the seat. Had he gone there himself he would have been guilty of the sin of pride and hence not perfect and hence destroyed.

4. What was the Holy Grail? What mig. t it symbolize? -- The quest for the Holy Grail possibly symbolizes man's quest for spiritual wholeness, which has been lost through sin. In discussion the students might be brought to see the various motives that send men on quests --the search for material happiness (Gareth and Linet) and the search for spiritual completeness (Galahad). The recurring use of a journey or quest can be seen as a basic metaphor of life itself, one of the concepts that is emphasized in this year's work.

5. With the coming of Galahad, the Round Table was completed. What happens next? Why can this episode be said to be rooted in reality? -- See question 1 above. With the completion of the Round Table, the ideal has been realized. But in the world nothing remains stable, and the downward swing begins immediately.

6. Why did Galahad ask for death? -- He explains it himself, but it is important for the students to understand. The man who was the most successful knight of them all turns his back on life and the things of this world, for the perfect bliss of the spirit. This story is the reflection of a deeply spiritual age: all the battles and glory and earthly felicity are viewed in their proper perspective sub specie aeternitatis. The Arthurian cycle illustrates a society with a strongly Christian system of values.

Study Questions for Part Four

1. What caused the dissolution of the Round Table? Could this have been avoided? Give reasons for your answer. -- The Garden of Eden and the Golden Age of Greece could not endure, neither could the ideal state of King Arthur. In the human condition, perfection cannot be maintained, even though it be briefly attained. The real glory is in the striving, although the thing sought after so often eludes us, mainly through our own human weakness. Like the Greek heroes of old, although powerful, Arthur was not able to combat the evil forces at work in all human affairs, so the glory faded and died.

2. We have said that the Arthurian legends are rooted in reality. Review the causes of the decay of the Round Table. To what degree is human nature involved in the catastrophe? How realistic is this? -- This question can be pursued as far as you like, and should give rise to some interesting discussions. Arthur had known almost from the beginning that the Round Table was doomed, that the ideal society would be destroyed. But in the working out of an inevitable destiny, human nature is the agent. Good and evil are inextricably mixed. Arthur married Guenever against Merlin's advice. Arthur's human passions resulted in the birth of Mordred. Galahad the purest of men completed the Round Table which immediately began to disintegrate. The Quest for the Holy Grail resulted in the dissolution of the Fellowship. Launcelot's noble act in saving the Queen resulted in the death of Gaheris and Gareth. What made Mordred so evil? The students should see that ultimately the fall of Arthur's reign is due to human nature, with all its flaws and weaknesses. The actors in this tragedy are more than pasteboard figures of knights and ladies; in spite of their impossible deeds of derring-do they are intensely human--realistic if you will.

3. Why did Gawaine behave as he did? Why did Arthur allow himself to be guided by Gawaine? -- Answers will probably vary, and the text is no help. Gawaine can be seen as implacable at the death of his brothers, especially Gaheris and Gareth. Arthur behaves naturally enough. He is old and tired and disillusioned. He has lost Guenever and Launcelot; he knows the end is near; Gawaine is the one he loves best. The power is passing from him.

4. What is the significance of the returning of the sword to the Lake? -- This may be regarded as the end of Arthur's mission. He gives the power he received back to its source. Sir Bedivere behaves in an intensely human manner throughout.

5. Why doesn't Arthur die on the battlefield like everyone else? -- The students should see that the mysterious departure of the King to Avilion and the legend that he will return are a cluster of mythical elements about the dying King that tend to give him the status of a divine being. This is the myth-making process at work. Such a motif is familiar: the semi-divine hero who will return to save his country in its future hour of peril.

6. With Arthur dead, why did Launcelot and Guenever not marry, and spend the rest of their lives together? Could this story have ended any other way than in tragedy? Give reasons for your answer.

Suggestions for Writing Assignments

1. Write a brief account of life in feudal times as you have pieced the picture together from your reading of the Arthurian Legends.

2. Describe in detail two knights in full armor engaged in combat. You write this from the romantic viewpoint of a distant spectator, or from the realistic viewpoint of a participant. The tone may be either serious or humorous.

3. Discuss the supernatural elements that are woven into the stories of King Arthur. Compare them with other legends you are familiar with, and try to explain their significance.

4. Compare the story of Gareth and Linet with a popular television show. Point out the features that are common to both, and then note the important differences. If you can, try to say which seems to you the better story, and why.

5. King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were the heroes of feudal society. The stories of their exploits reveal a lot about the people who admired them. The behavior they found admirable was the kind of behavior they expected of themselves, although few were able to live up to the ideal. Gareth, for example accepted the scorn of Linet with noble restraint and courtesy. He respected the knightly qualities of men who opposed him, and persisted with courage in the face of danger and hardship until he had accomplished his purpose of freeing the imprisoned Dame Liones.

Who are the heroes of today? Write a few paragraphs about the exploits of one of them, and show how these deeds and these heroes reflect the values of our modern society, the things we consider important. Explain what kind of people we are in the light of the qualities we admire.

6. Several times during the telling of the stories of King Arthur, Malory has suggested that no matter what a man does, he is powerless to change his destiny. Find instances that illustrate this belief, and discuss the influence this idea had upon the lives of Arthur and his knights.

7. Write an account of the life of someone you admire. Be specific, and tell exactly what this person has done to earn your admiration. What does this reveal about yourself?

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